

[Texting Question: **Name something hard to forgive.**]

[**Keep the texting question up**] There have been a couple of times in my life I've had an experience I'd label as "hard to forgive", a time when forgiveness didn't even seem to be an option. When I was 13, my dad cheated on my mom, and my parents divorced. My dad continued to date the woman he'd had the affair with for more than a year after the divorce, and in my 13-year-old brain, it was somehow all her fault (even though we all know it takes 2 to tango, so to speak).

I spent months hating her. That was 20 years ago now, and in all those years since, those months have become my paradigm for unforgiveness. My parents' divorce devastated 13-year-old me. I couldn't understand then the complex, complicated factors that lead up to and away from that event; I could really only perceive how it ruined me and my siblings.

What I remember most from that time was how all-consuming my unforgiveness became. Though I hated her, she occupied all my thoughts. She was never far from me, this woman who had blown up my life. As if I weren't already angsty enough as a 90s teen, my fixation with her transformed me into a dark person, full of spite and ugliness.

Look at what you've said: [**Texting Answers**].

These are painful things. Deep things. Betrayals. Broken relationships. Actual injury. And I'm willing to bet you know the experience I was describing. That sort of all-consuming obsession with the person who wronged you. If the pain is deep enough, we're not even sure how forgiveness can be an option.

In any case even with smaller slights, our forgiveness has limits. We have a saying - you know it: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice... *shame on me*.

There's an implication in there, a posture toward the world it encourages. We should live open, generous lives. Until we're wronged.

Once we're wronged, we close ourselves off. Because if we open ourselves up to the person who wronged us again, they'll wrong us again. And then we only have ourselves to blame.

Shame on *you* the first time. But shame on *me* every time after that.

There's not much room for forgiveness in there.

And what I want to suggest to you this morning is that this is a toxic way to live. It's *safe*, but ultimately poisonous. I want to suggest that, as scary, as risky as it sounds, choosing a radical, no-holds-barred forgiveness is actually better.

I want to suggest that while our anger and spite feel good, they're actually cages that only radical forgiveness has the power to free us from.

Believe it or not, forgiveness is freedom.

You're probably thinking... That sounds nice, man, but it's actually crazy irresponsible. You can't just forgive people or they'll keep taking advantage of you.

[A ledger sheet can illustrate all these] I understand that thinking, but I want to suggest this morning that those objections come from a particular way of looking at forgiveness as a zero-sum system. Consider, if you will, a ledger sheet. We use these to track money, but it fits how we think of forgiveness, too.

When someone wrongs us, they go "in the red", from our perspective, like they owe us. There's a relational gap. Until this gap is closed, the relationship is fractured. So maybe they apologize. Or they make it up to us somehow. Or... if we're feeling particularly generous, we forgive them.

Our forgiveness is a way to erase their relational debt. To say, "This doesn't exist anymore."

But what happens if someone wrongs you over and over and over? What if, when you forgive them, they wrong you again? How many times are you supposed to erase this debt?

We're taught to be careful how often we do this. Remember - fool me twice, shame on *me*. Don't dole out forgiveness too many times to the same person or you'll get taken advantage of.

Now, believe it or not, we're not the first people to understand this concept, and to ask the question, "How many times am I supposed to forgive?"

In Jesus' day, this was a popular question. And some of the teachers in Jesus' day were much more generous than we are. They didn't say to forgive once. They suggested you should be prepared to forgive someone as many as *seven* times before you cut them off. That's quite a bit more patient and generous than our culture, isn't it?

So one day, one of Jesus' disciples poses this common question to Jesus: Take a look, in Matthew 18:

Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times -- Matthew 18:21-22

You can imagine Peter feels pretty good about himself. After all, he's suggesting the most generous answer on the table - up to 7 times?

But Jesus says, No, Peter. You should forgive as much as seventy-seven times (other translations read 70 x 7, which would be 490 times). Either way, the point is: a *lot*.

And then, to illustrate why he came up with such a crazy number, Jesus tells a story. Jesus often taught in parables. When he explained spiritual truths, he told stories filled with examples pulled from the every-day lives of his listeners.

That makes it hard for us to connect with these stories, because we're not ancient Palestinians. We're 21st century Americans. So in this series, we've been asking, What would Jesus' stories sound like if he'd come *today* instead of 2000 years ago? The first several stories were taken from a book called *The First Time We Saw Him*, by Matt Mikalatos. But the last couple have been written by some of us. And today's story, the story Jesus tells about forgiveness was written by Amy Dennis, one of our own here at Catalyst.

So imagine you're Peter. You're used to living in the "fool me twice, shame on me" culture, and you have quite magnanimously suggested we should forgive up to 7 times. And Jesus says, No. You're wrong. You should be prepared to forgive not once, not twice, not seven times, but seventy-seven, seventy times seven times."

And as you're about to prepare your objections, Jesus tells this story:

Imagine a 65-inch TV screen glowing blue. Nick flips through channel after channel, hundreds of them, while Jenny lounges next to him on the couch spinning the rings on each of her fingers. She smells fantastic, as always. Was that the Chanel she was wearing? All three kids are silently and conveniently absorbed in iPads.

Nick rests the remote on his knee as an infomercial chatters away. He stretches luxuriously, raising his hands toward the ceiling and then letting them rest behind his head. His eyes fall on the stack of bills growing next to the TV: a reminder that all is not as peaceful as it seems. Mixed in with the bills are several eviction notices from Don. Nick can't even remember the last time they paid rent. They were living on borrowed time, and Nick knew it. He'd brought the TV home months ago, but they hadn't even started to pay it off yet. He knew both cars were hidden away safely in the garage, away from the clutches of the tow truck and the repo man. He'd rather not think about it, though. It was Friday: time to relax.

A knock on the door knots Nick's stomach. He and Jenny face each other in tense silence. "Don't answer it," she says. "You know it'll be Don."

Nick drags himself off the couch and heads for the door, ready to face the landlord one more time. "He can hear the TV. I'll just stall him again. He won't do anything; he never does."

Nick swings open the door to find Don there, along with two uniformed police officers and a moving truck. Well, this is different, Nick thinks.

Don clears his throat with a quiet authority. "Nick, Jenny. It's time. You know it's time to go. I've been patient. I've let you slide on rent for eight months now; more than I've ever done for anyone. I've sent you notice after notice, and I've held off on the eviction far longer than I should have. I'd hoped you'd pull it together, so you and the kids could stay here, but I have to fill this property with paying tenants now.

It's time to go."

"Go where?!" Nick asks. He feels the world shifting beneath his feet, as if an earthquake was moving his life around from the inside out.

[Jail Cell] "Well," Don begins, "you and Jenny are headed downtown to be booked. You're both on the lease, so you'll both go. I'm told that the kids will be placed in protective custody. Everything that belongs to you goes in the truck. I'll sell it off to recover some of the enormous debt you owe me."

Jenny buckles. Before Nick can catch her, she falls to her knees in tears. Her manicured hands rest helplessly on her knees. As Nick reaches for her shoulder, his watch catches the light from the TV. He

can't look Don in the eye. A voice that seems far away but coming from his own soul begins to ask, beg, plead with Don. "Our children? Please. None of this is their fault. It's my fault. Please! I'll pay it all back. Even more. Please, don't take away our kids, our home. You can't."

His eyes move across the faces of the landlord, the officers. The movers hang back and won't even look at him. All is silent. His eyes fall to rest on the handcuffs at the hip of the officer nearest him. They glow at him in the blue light of the TV.

Don clears his throat. "Nick, you and I both know that you can never, never pay back the rent you owe. And even if you could pay me, what about the rest of it? I've seen your credit report, remember? You owe me tens of thousands of dollars. You owe the bank. You owe your creditors. I did a little digging, found some aliases - do you even know how much you actually owe? I do. I added it all up. You could buy a small island with all the money you've squandered over the years."

"You're in over your head, and we both know that rent is last on your list. All the choices you've made, the house, the cars, the TVs, all those little luxuries... it all brought you here. I can't imagine how you could even start to pay it all back... can you?"

Nick feels himself crumble next to Jenny. It was as if his will, his stubbornness, his greed had drained out all at once— Don had just come along and caused their world to shift. Nick can't speak. He can't even breathe. He wonders when he'll see Jenny again. Where his kids will end up. Any second now, the handcuffs will take the place of his watch.

He knelt in the doorframe, begging, "Please... not my kids. Please."

"Nick... Nick, look at me."

Nick's defeated eyes lift to Don's solemn face. It takes an eternity to meet Don's stern, piercing eyes. Here it comes. The handcuffs. The end. But then he saw something soften.

Don sighed, "Okay Nick. I'm giving you a clean slate."

Silence.

"Nick. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? I'm wiping out your debt. Your rent, all the back payments, it's all forgiven. I'll be contacting your creditors to make it right with them. Your cars, they'll be paid off as of Monday morning. Everything will be paid. You can start over. I want you to start over."

Outside the door, the police officers and movers step back in confusion. They'd come here to get a job done, and now this? They'd never seen anything like it before.

Don's hand reaches down to Jenny's shoulder. "Stand up. Look at me, Jenny. Nick, get up." Nick and Jenny unfold themselves and stand uncertainly before Don. Was this real?

"Don... why... why are you doing this for us? I thought you were here to get rid of us."

“Nick, Jenny... your debt is forgiven. Don’t forget that. I bet you have some forgiving to do, too. That’s the only way you can repay me. Go do for someone else what I just did for you. And go take care of your kids. It’s their bedtime.”

With that, Don turns and shuffles the confused group off the porch, down the sidewalk, and back out into the night. Nick and Jenny are left standing silently. The magnitude of what had just occurred was only now beginning to dawn on them.

Nick turns to Jenny. “Did that just happen?” Jenny’s tearful smile tells that him it had. A clean slate? He’d never dreamed of such a thing. That night, they sleep soundly for the first time in years. The debt collectors won’t call. The tow truck won’t idle in the alley, waiting for them to come out.

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[Lawn Mower in a Backyard?] Morning comes, brighter and fresher than it has in recent memory. The coffee even smells better as Nick sips it and looks out over the back yard. Time to start again. The lawn needs mowing: it’s the perfect way to start fresh, cut through all the weeds, and start over. He’d go get the mower back from Kevin next door.

Kevin opens the door with a nervous smile. “Niiiiiiick... hey. What’s up, neighbor?”

“Hey man, I need the mower back. Time to get the grass in shape.”

“Yeah, Nick, about the mower. I... oh man, this is embarrassing. I was short on rent last month and I needed cash anywhere I could get it.” Kevin’s eyes dropped to the porch. “I, uh... I had to sell it but I get paid tomorrow, man, and I’ll get you a new one, an even better one. I’ll mow your lawn for you, too, as soon as I get paid. I’m really sorry.” Kevin meets Nick’s flashing eyes and waits for a verdict.

Nick erupts. “Kevin, are you freaking kidding me?! That mower cost three grand, dude! It wasn’t yours! You didn’t pay for it! What right did you have?! You owe me big time, neighbor.” Nick drops his coffee mug to the porch step as he pushes Kevin backwards through the doorway. Kevin’s hands are raised in surrender. He isn’t asking for trouble; he just needs another day.

Nick steps over the threshold into Kevin’s living room. “I will see a new mower by the end of the day. Either that or the money to buy one myself. Today, Kevin. And I am not afraid to pick up my phone, call the cops, and let them know you stole my mower. Remember that.” Nick boots the broken coffee mug out of the way as he storms home.

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The mower never arrives. The cash never shows up. It’s time. Nick grabs his phone to call 9-1-1. Kevin will be sorry.

Before he can dial, Kevin hears a knock on the door. Good. Probably Kevin, and not a moment too soon. Time to get his money back. It’ll be good to have full pockets again; it’s been a long time coming.

Nick swings open the door to find Don waiting on the porch along with the officers, the same ones as before. The moving truck idles at the curb, back doors open and ramp lowered to the ground. Again, Nick loses the power of speech. His eyes search Don's face for that softness but finds only icy cold.

Don clears his throat. "Nick, now it's time for you to go."

"What is this? I thought you said..." Nick's words die before they can grow.

Don sighs. "I wanted to forgive your debt. All of it, every last cent. And all I asked was that you do the same for someone else. Then, this morning, I had an interesting phone conversation. I gave your neighbor a ring to see when he planned on mowing his lawn. You are aware, Nick, that Kevin is renting his house from me just like you are? Actually, not just like you; Kevin has always paid his rent on time. He told me about the mower, and then he told me he'd be short on rent next month because he had to pay you back first. He was worried about what you might do; wouldn't even let his kids play outside today. Said he was afraid you'd target them."

[Jail Cell Image?] Nick has no reply. The only sound is the click of the handcuffs as they close around his wrist and chime against his watch. Don remembers how Nick was always full of words anytime he needed more time, or more money, or more mercy. But now, to defend his actions, only silence.

Jenny emerges from the kitchen, her necklace flashing brightly as she drops several shopping bags on the floor. Her eyes meet Nick's, and they both know that the end has come.

Jesus concluded: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." -- 18:35

That's a heavy story - a lot to take in there. Overwhelmingly, though, can we all agree that Nick is the worst?! It's hard to feel too sorry for him. After all, he got an impossible second chance, and then he turned around and passed none of that on to poor Kevin.

Nick somehow couldn't see that he should pass the insane, impossible forgiveness he'd received on to the other people in his life. That the debt Kevin owed him - as real as it was, paled in comparison to what he'd just escaped from.

But just as we're ready to condemn Nick, we pause. Because we have to ask... are we like Nick? Could it be that we are just as guilty of refusing to pass on the forgiveness we've received to those in our lives who owe us?

Of course, Jesus implies the answer is Yes, when we choose not to forgive, we're just like Nick. And the same fate awaits us: judgment. Condemnation.

Now this is where you say, But wait! You don't understand what's been done to me. Of course, if we're talking about stealing a parking spot at Firewheel or maybe messing with Texas, I should just get over it.

But what about actually, objectively terrible wrongs? They stole from you, cost you your business. Or they abused you, violated you. Left you. Abandoned you. Destroyed your family.

These are real hurts that can't merely be brushed away. Is Jesus saying they don't matter?

No he's not. In fact, that's why I love this story. Kevin owes Nick a few thousand dollars. That's not an inconsequential amount. Who here, if someone said, Hey, would you like this \$3K would shrug and say, Nah... I'm busy this week. I'm not even sure how I'd spend it all. Thanks but no thanks.

Of course not. Three grand is a real, significant amount.

But Nick owes hundreds of millions of dollars. Frankly, the least believable part of the story is that anyone could even *get* that far in debt. Kevin owes Nick like .000001 times as much as Nick owes the landlord.

What happens if you try to put that on a ledger sheet? I'll give you a hint: you can't, really. Those two sums are so far apart, they're nearly impossible to compare.

And that's Jesus' point: it's not that what has been done to us doesn't matter. It matters a great deal. It's that when we choose to live life on a ledger, when we choose to keep track of everything done to us and mete out forgiveness according to what seems fair to us, we will always come out losers. We owe infinitely more to God than we could hope to repay.

In light of that, how can we do anything but forgive?

But... we want to ask Jesus, Are you telling us just to forgive and forget? To continue to subject ourselves to someone else's painful choices over and over?

This is the real fear, isn't it? If I'm in an abusive relationship, does God want me to stay with my abuser, to pray really hard and try to forgive them and just keep taking it?

No, God doesn't require that of you.

If I have a child who will not live in harmony with the rest of the house, no matter what we've done, is "forgiveness" allowing them to return over and over, to continue to disrupt the home and take advantage of us?

No, that's not what forgiveness means.

If someone steals from me, do I let them back into my business (or my home) over and over, knowing they'll steal from me again?

No. That's not what forgiveness means.

Before forgiveness is an external interaction, it's an internal journey. Forgiveness is about getting rid of the ledger sheet. It's about refusing to live your life by keeping score, running tallies, judging people by how much they're "in the red".

It *doesn't* mean you have to be a doormat.

But it *does* mean you have to engage in the difficult, painful spiritual work of moving to a place where the other person doesn't control you. That's why the woman with whom my dad had an affair has become a paradigm for forgiveness for me. I had to learn to forgive her, to move to a place where she didn't dominate my thoughts, where a large part of my day wasn't consumed by thoughts of how much I hated her.

She had no idea how I felt - we barely ever interacted. No, my journey of forgiveness was all about me. How I felt. What I spent my day thinking about.

And I didn't want to spend my time thinking about the person who hurt me. That's how unforgiveness becomes a cage. Our hate feels powerful, it feels like we're in control, but in reality we're trapped by thoughts of the person we hate.

Forgiveness is how we find freedom. In letting go. In moving on.

Forgiveness is taking your life back, refusing to let what someone else did to you define you. It's not easy. It's not simple. It's not quick. But it's the path to freedom.

Which brings me to that troubling last thing Jesus says at the end of the story:

Jesus concluded: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." -- 18:35

What does he mean by this? That if we don't forgive, God is going to *get* us?

No... not exactly. When we choose not to forgive, we're choosing to continue to live life on the ledger sheet. We're looking at what they owe us, how much *they're* in the red, and holding it over them. Enjoying how powerful it makes us feel.

But the ledger is bad news. Because we're all in the red. You and me and everyone else. We've all wronged someone. We all owe a debt.

The good news is that in God's infinite, incomprehensible, irresponsible mercy, God has forgiven us. God crumpled up the ledger sheet and tossed it out. Said, just like Don the landlord, All is forgiven. You get a fresh start. A clean slate.

God's forgiveness invites us into a whole new world, one free of debts and debtors. And when we choose to be like Nick, when we choose not to forgive, we uncrumple the ledger sheet and wave it high.

And if we choose to live on a ledger sheet, God will let us. But we will *always* lose that game. Always. That's why God invites us into a world free of ledger sheets. Free of scorekeeping and grudge-holding. A world free through the power of forgiveness.

And we *can* do this because in Jesus' death and resurrection, he bled into the red for us. In one fell swoop, he destroyed the ledger sheet once and for all.

Every journey of forgiveness begins at the foot of the cross, when we hear the landlord tell us, All is forgiven. Today, I'm making a fresh start for you. Now go and do likewise.

You have been forgiven. It's an invitation.

I want you to take out the piece of ledger paper you received on the way in. I'm going to give you a minute or so of silence for you to prayerfully reflect on whose names you might be putting on this list. Against whom are you harboring unforgiveness? Against whom are you holding a grudge? Who occupies way too much space in your mind?

Write those names down on your ledger paper (don't put your name on the top).

Prayerfully consider this list that has consumed you, that has occupied your mind, your life.

Ask God to help you forgive these names, and thank God for forgiving you first. Thank God for destroying the ledger sheet and all the chains that keep you enslaved. Then as you are ready, crumple it up, and head outside. Toss your ledger sheet into the fire as an act of forgiveness. Step into the light and the fresh air as an act of freedom.

Then come back around through the building in a spirit of freedom and prayer.